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ABSTRACT

Until very recently, assessment in the Arabian Gulf focused primarily on high stakes testing. However, with the increased popularity of multiple-measure assessment, institutions in the region are adopting alternative forms of assessment. This paper provides a rationale for alternative assessment in the English-as-a-Foreign/Second-Language (EFL/ESL) setting. More specifically, a literature review of assessment research is provided and an evaluation of assessment reform at two government tertiary institutions is described. Alternative assessments generally meet the following criteria: focus is on documenting student growth over time rather than on comparing students with one another; emphasis is on students' strengths--what they know and what they can do with the language--rather than on their weaknesses; consideration is given to learning styles, language proficiencies, cultural and educational backgrounds, and grade levels of students; authenticity is prized because it is based on activities that represent actual progress toward instructional goals and reflect tasks typical of classrooms and real-life settings. Specific sections address the emergence of alternative assessment, traditional versus alternative assessment, assessment in the Arabian Gulf, and alternative assessment in the United Arab Emirates. It is concluded that alternative assessment is a superior learning and teaching tool, and that its growing use in the Arabian Gulf region is a positive development. (Contains 2 figures and 11 references.) (KFT)

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Alternative Assessment Acquisition in the United Arab Emirates

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Introduction

Until very recently, assessment in the Arabian Gulf has focused primarily on high-stakes examinations. However, with the increased popularity of multiple measures assessment, institutions in the region are adopting alternative forms of assessment. This paper provides a rationale for alternative assessment in EF/SL testing. More specifically assessment reform at two government tertiary institutions will be described. Finally, future directions in this important area of assessment will be outlined.

What is alternative assessment?

In the past decade, educators have come to realize that alternative assessments are an important means of gaining a dynamic picture of students' academic and linguistic development (Tannenbaum 1996). Alternative assessment is defined as the ongoing process involving the student and teacher in making judgements about the student's progress in language using non-conventional strategies (Hancock 1994). Hamayan (1995) describes alternative assessment procedures as those techniques which can be used within the context of instruction and can be easily incorporated into the daily activities of the school or classroom (p. 213). The concept is particularly relevant to FL/SL instruction because it focuses attention on what students can do with the language rather than what they are able to produce or recall (Huerta-Macias 1995). According to Huerta-Macias (1995 p. 8) there is no single definition of 'alternative assessment'. Rather, a "variety of labels has been used to distinguish it from traditional standardized testing." The main goal is to gather data about how students are processing and completing authentic tasks in the target language. In general, alternative assessments generally meet these common criteria:

- Focus is on documenting student growth over time, rather than on comparing students with one another (Tannenbaum 1996; Valdez-Pierce & O'Malley 1992; Stiggins 1987)
- Emphasis is on students' strengths (what they know and can do with the language), rather than on their weaknesses (Tannenbaum 1996)
- Consideration is given to the learning styles, language proficiencies, cultural and educational backgrounds, and grade levels of students (Tannenbaum 1996)
- Is authentic because it is based on activities that represent actual progress toward instructional goals and reflect tasks typical of classrooms and real-life settings (Baron 1992; Stiggins 1987; Tierney, Carter & Desai 1991)

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The Emergence of Alternative Assessment

According to Fradd and Hudelson (1995) there is good reason for the emergence of alternative assessment measures in developing effective assessment procedures. Until very recently, control over the collection and interpretation of assessment information was kept by school administrators and a centralized authority. Now, however, this control has shifted towards classrooms where assessment occurs on a regular and continual basis. As teachers and students become more involved in the assessment process, the ways of measuring progress in a language have become less prescribed and more straightforward.

Traditional vs Alternative Assessment

One useful way of understanding the concept of alternative assessment is to contrast it to traditional testing. Alternative assessment is different from traditional assessment in that it actually asks students to show what they can do. Students are evaluated on what they integrate and produce rather than on what they are able to recall and reproduce. (Huerta-Macias 1994). According to Hancock (1994), tests have "come to be an accepted component of instructional programs throughout the world." Tests are a means of determining whether students have learned what they have been taught. Sometimes tests serve as feedback to students on their overall progress in a language course. Oller (1979, p. 401) states that "the purpose of tests is to measure variance in performances of various sorts." If this is true, then tests are administered at key points within a semester to sample and monitor student learning.

In contrast, alternative assessment provides alternatives to traditional testing in that it:

- does not intrude on regular classroom activities
- reflects the curriculum that is actually being implemented in the classroom
- provides information on the strengths and weaknesses of each individual student
- provides multiple indices that can be used to gauge student progress
- is more multiculturally sensitive and free of the norm, linguistic, and cultural biases found in traditional testing

(Huerta-Macias 1994)

Kathy Bailey (1998 pg. 207) provides us with a very useful chart that effectively contrasts traditional and alternative assessment (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Contrasting Traditional and Alternative Assessment

Traditional Assessment	Alternative Assessment
One-shot tests	Continuous, longitudinal assessment
Indirect tests	Direct tests
Inauthentic tests	Authentic assessment
Individual projects	Group projects
No feedback provided to learners	Feedback provided to learners
Timed exams	Untimed exams
Decontextualized test tasks	Contextualized test tasks
Norm-referenced score interpretation	Criterion-referenced score interpretation
Standardized tests	Classroom-based tests

Assessment in the Arabian Gulf

To say that language assessment in the Arabian Gulf is important is an understatement. The school system encourages rote learning on the part of the students and they subsequently pass large-scale, high-stakes exams at the end of the year. Their futures as students depend on these marks. When students get to university, they often encounter assessment methods that are foreign to them.

The assessment context in the Arabian Gulf is an interesting one. The teacher population in the secondary schools is primarily Arabic speaking. Students are encouraged to memorize huge chunks of materials and then regurgitate it for their final exams. When students begin their tertiary education, they take classes with native speakers with the educational equivalent of an M.A. in TEFL or an RSA Dip. The assessment measures in the tertiary context were, until very recently, high-stakes exams with some degree of teacher input into the grade.

However, in recent years, Gulf institutions have begun to reassess their evaluation procedures. Now, government tertiary institutions like the UAE University, the Higher Colleges of Technology and Zayed University are adopting multiple-measures assessment programs in an effort to downscale the importance of high-stakes exams. One of the components of their multiple-measures assessment programs is the addition of alternative assessment measures.

Alternative Assessment in the United Arab Emirates

This paper documents the history of planning and initial implementation of alternative assessment measures at two of the three government tertiary institutions in the UAE: Zayed University (ZU) and the United Arab Emirates University (UAEU).

The concept of adopting alternative assessment procedures was first proposed at the UAEU in the mid 1990s. However, because of existing university by-laws and the continual revision of the curriculum, the proposal for assessment reform has not yet been finalized. The overall assessment breakdown for students at the University General

Requirement Unit (UGRU) has remained at a 60, 30, 10 split for a number of years. These figures represent percentages given to the final exam, midterm exam and teacher input respectively. Despite the fact that no official percentage of a student's mark was relegated to alternative assessment, UGRU faculty were quick to see the benefits of using infusing these procedures into their classes. Many instructors used their 10% teacher input grade to assess students' abilities on projects, journals, portfolios and presentations.

In 1997, a major revision of the existing curriculum was undertaken. Curriculum developers submitted a proposal which was tentatively approved for Spring 2000. In this proposal, curriculum developers recommended that the overall breakdown of grades should be 60, 20, 20. Therefore, it was proposed that an additional 10% of the student's midterm exam grade would be shifted to include alternative assessment. In this new curriculum, commercial textbooks were adapted for the first time. The methodology of these textbooks lent themselves very well to a number of alternative assessment projects.

In their curriculum development proposal, the UGRU team chose to relegate only 10% of the total grade to alternative assessment for a number of reasons. Firstly, one of the curriculum team leaders at UGRU had participated on the same team for the start-up of the new Zayed University.

Zayed University is the brainchild of His Excellency Sheikh Nahayan bin Mabarek Al Nayahay, Minister of Higher Education and Chancellor of the three government tertiary institutions. This all-female university had a unique mandate from HE Sheikh Nahayan. The ZU mission statement included an integration of the four skills through the use of instructional technology. More specifically, all students and faculty at ZU were to have laptop computers for use inside and outside the classroom. Moreover, all classrooms at ZU were to be fully-networked so that students could actively conduct Internet research in the classroom and faculty could exploit numerous computer software packages. This innovative mandate also called for the use of multiple measures assessment to determine students' language proficiency. One of the multiple measures proposed was the use of alternative assessment procedures (Lyons 1998). The proposed grade breakdown at ZU for the start up academic year (Sept. 1998-99) was as follows (see Figure 2):

Figure 2: Overview of Piloted ZU Assessment

Measure	%
Teacher Input/Classroom Assessment	20
Mastery Checks (Pass/Fail)	10
Alternative Assessment	30
Midterm	15
Final	25

Challenges at ZU

At the start-up orientation, all incoming faculty at ZU were introduced to the concept of using alternative assessment for a relatively large proportion of their students' grades. Much work was put in by administration and faculty in developing curriculum-related projects linked to the student's other subjects (Arabic, Instructional Technology and Math Sciences). A great deal of resources were expended to develop and formulate marking criteria for the various alternative assessment projects. Yet midway through the first semester, there were rumblings of discontent amongst faculty. The most common complaints were that they were spending much more time than expected on the marking of these projects. Intermarker calibration was also a concern and a lot of energy was spent ensuring reliability. In addition, many felt that not enough English language learning was taking place during the project phase of the course (Whitney & McGuire 1998).

Alternative Assessment Reform at ZU

Because of these challenges, the ZU curriculum and assessment teams chose to downscale the alternative assessment component to a more manageable percentage. Content area programs have implemented integrated projects with English. This practice has served to decrease the total number of projects per student resulting in more time for English language learning to take place. In addition, faculty have fewer projects to mark and more time to devote to developing reliable marking scales and participating in recalibration sessions. Therefore, the challenges faced by ZU faculty during the start-up semester were successfully overcome by making several minor adjustments and fine tuning the assessment plan.

Progress on Alternative Assessment at UAEU

As previously stated, the adoption of alternative assessment procedures has been slow to take root at UAEU. Because of the ZU experience, curriculum developers and testers have elected to be conservative in implementing alternative assessment. They have used a variety of sources (i.e. external review team, visiting scholars) to better prepare themselves for the trials and tribulations of using alternative assessment. In fact, the theme of the 4th Annual Current Trends in English Language Testing or CTELT Conference, *Alternative Assessment in Language Testing*, was consciously selected to better inform curriculum developers and testers in the area on instituting alternative assessment in their programs.

Consequently, UAEU curriculum developers have chosen to give only 10% of a student's mark to these practices. It is hoped that when the UAEU administration approve the implementation of these techniques that the pilot year will be successful.

Future Directions

For a variety of reasons well beyond the scope of this paper, some Gulf Arab students simply do not perform well on traditional tests. Because language performance depends heavily on the purpose for language use and the context in which it is done, it makes sense to provide students with assessment opportunities that reflect these practices. In addition, we as language testers must be responsive to differing learning styles of students. In the real world, we must demonstrate that we can complete tasks using the English language effectively both at work and in social settings. Our assessment practices must reflect the importance of using language both in and outside of the language classroom. As Hancock (1994) points out, "language programs that focus on alternative assessment are likely to instill in students lifelong skills related to critical thinking that build a basis for future learning".

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